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Responding to Cultural and Linguistic Differences in the Beliefs and Practices of Families with Young Children

Sophanara stands in the doorway holding her mother's hand. They are next in line to enter the Head Start classroom. Sophanara has watched other 4-year-olds enter the room with their mothers or fathers. But she hesitates. Miss Miller, the teacher, smiles and says hello. Sophanara looks down at her shoes. She doesn't understand what Miss Miller is saying. Sophanara's parents are from Cambodia. Although her father has learned a little English where he works, no one speaks English at home.

Miss Miller invites Sophanara's mother to come into the classroom and gestures her welcome with her hands. Her mother has had very little experience with people outside of the Cambodian community. Although she had only two years of formal schooling in Cambodia, she believes that education is important for her daughter. She expects the school to do what is best and believes that the school is responsible for making sure that her daughter

does well. Sophanara's mother listens to Miss Miller but doesn't understand what the teacher is saying. After a moment's hesitation, she nods and brings Sophanara into this new world with her.

or

In the United States in 1995, an estimated 60 percent of the young children (birth to 5 years) who were not yet in school spent some time each week in early childhood education and care programs (West, Wright, & Hausken 1995). These young children reflect the great racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity of our society. They are members of families that speak languages other than English, families that have social customs different from those of the mainstream culture, and families that hold different beliefs about child development and different expectations for their children.

What are the implications of this diversity for teachers of early childhood classrooms? It is impossible here to cover all of the variations in

beliefs and the sometimes subtle nuances that distinguish beliefs and practices across cultural groups in the United States. In this review we provide illustrations of the ways in which cultural differences in parents' beliefs and practices may affect children's adjustment to early childhood settings, and suggestions for working with young children who bridge two cultures as they transition between home and the early childhood classroom.

Cultural values, beliefs, and socialization goals

All parents have some goals and expectations for their children. Differences in parental goals and expectations arise in part because parents have children for different reasons (Hoffman 1988) and because societies have different expectations for the members of their communities (LeVine 1988). For example, in many Western societies, including European American traditions in the

United States, there is an emphasis on people being independent, self-reliant, and self-assertive and a focus on individual achievement (Spence 1985; Triandis et al. 1988). In contrast, in many Asian and Latin American cultures, interdependence, cooperation, and collaboration are widely held values (Harrison et al. 1990). Differences in these general cultural values or expectations for members of communities can lead to differences in the socialization goals and strategies that parents adopt for their children (Ogbu 1981; Garcia Coll 1990).

We begin this section by discussing examples of the ways in which cultural values are translated into parents' expectations for their children. Then we highlight cultural variation in parents' beliefs about development.

Goals and expectations

First, let's consider parents' ideas about the characteristics most desirable in children. Harwood (1992) asked three groups of mothers of 12- to 24-month-olds what qualities and behaviors they would like and not like their child to develop. Compared to Puerto Rican mothers from lower-class families, European American mothers from both lower- and middle-class families were more likely to indicate desirable traits that relate to personal development (for example, self-confidence, independence, talents, and abilities) and self-control (for instance, restraining oneself from being greedy, aggressive, or selfish). Thirty-five percent of responses of the middle-class European American mothers emphasized some aspect of personal development.

By contrast, the Puerto Rican mothers were more likely to talk about characteristics that focus on being respectful (for example, politeness, obedience) and loving (friendliness, getting along with others). In

fact, nearly 40 percent of the characteristics spontaneously mentioned by the Puerto Rican mothers had to do with respectfulness. Less than 3 percent of the traits mentioned by the middle-class European American mothers fell into this category. Thus, parents considered different characteristics to be most important to their children's development, and these differences appear to reflect general cultural orientations toward individuals and relationships.

Another example of cultural variation in parents' goals for their children is seen in a study of a diverse sample of immigrant and U.S.-born parents of kindergarten and first- and second-graders (Okagaki & Sternberg 1993). In this study the parents from four immigrant groups (Cambodian, Filipino, Mexican, and Vietnamese) rated developing obedience and conformity to external standards as more important for children's development than developing independent thinking and problem-solving skills. In contrast, the parents born in the United States (European American and Mexican American) rated developing independent behaviors as more important than developing conforming behaviors. In particular, the parents who were born in the United States believed that creative-thinking skills were the most important skills.

Finally let's focus on the way cultural values and socialization goals shape parents' interpretations of their children's behaviors. As in the previous examples, an individualistic cultural orientation is contrasted with a collectivist or mutual interdependence orientation. In this example, the attitudes of Canadian parents of European origin, who have held a more individualistic orientation, and Chinese parents, who have traditionally valued mutual interdependence, are considered.

In any group of infants or toddlers, there is variation in children's

responses to novel objects and unfamiliar situations. Some children are relatively relaxed when confronted with an unfamiliar situation and show little indication of distress. Other children react with high anxiety. They want to stay close to their mother or other primary caretaker. They do not readily explore novel objects or easily interact with unfamiliar people. These actions are indicators of behavioral inhibition.

Researchers have found that the meaning that parents place on these behaviors varies across cultural groups (Chen et al. 1998). In Chinese families, behavioral inhibition in toddlers was positively associated with maternal acceptance of the child and maternal belief in encouraging children's achievement. In contrast, in Canadian families, behavioral inhibition was negatively associated with maternal acceptance and encouragement of children's achievement. Similarly, among Chinese families, children who displayed *higher* levels of behavioral inhibition had mothers who were *less* likely to believe that physical punishment is the best way to discipline the child and were *less* likely to feel angry toward the child. However, in Canadian families mothers whose children displayed *higher* levels of behavioral inhibition were *more* likely to believe that physical punishment was the best discipline strategy.

In short, behavioral inhibition was associated with positive attitudes in Chinese mothers and negative attitudes in Canadian mothers. Although these perspectives on behavioral inhibition are quite opposite from each other, each perspective is consistent with the broader values of its culture.

Beliefs about development

In addition to the general orientation toward individualism or collectivism influencing parenting, other

culturally based beliefs undergird parents' beliefs about child development. For example, in their study of immigrant and nonimmigrant families, Okagaki and Sternberg (1993) found that parents have different ideas about what constitutes intelligent behavior. Latino and Asian parents held implicit theories of intelligence in which noncognitive aspects are as important as or more important to the meaning of intelligence than cognitive skills are.

In other words, they seemed to have a view of intelligence that does not rely as heavily on cognitive skills, such as creativity and verbal expression, but rather incorporates and emphasizes other attributes, such as motivation and social skills. For the Latino parents, social skills constitute a relatively important aspect of intelligence. For the Filipino and Vietnamese parents, motivation was a very important characteristic of intelligent first-graders; to be intelligent is to work hard at achieving one's goals. This is different from the Western psychological model of intelligence that focuses on innate cognitive abilities.

In a review of research on the caregiving of minority infants in the United States, Garcia Coll (1990) observed great variation in parents' beliefs about numerous aspects of child development. For example, among some Native American peoples, infants may be restricted in their movement during the first several months of life because they are carried on cradle boards (Garcia Coll 1990; Joe & Malach 1992). In contrast, many European American parents find playpens to be too restrictive and want their infants to be able to explore and move around their environments with greater freedom.

Implications for teachers and caregivers

These examples of distinctions in cultural groups' beliefs about



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children's behavior and development suggest that teachers cannot assume that everyone holds the same template for what constitutes an ideal child. For the child whose parents' expectations are congruent with the teacher's expectations for behavior and development, the transition to the early childhood setting may be relatively easy. But when there is a lack of congruence between parents' and teachers' expectations, children may have the additional burden of determining the implicit rules and expectations that govern the early childhood classroom.

What might teachers do to help children make a successful transition from their families' expectations for their behavior at home and the rules and expectations in their classrooms? An important first step for teachers is understanding parents' perspectives and parents' goals for their children. This requires that parents and teachers get to know and trust each other. It also involves more than traditional strategies in which teachers educate parents about the "best" strategies for encouraging children's development (cf., Powell & Diamond 1995).

We must talk with parents about our own experiences, beliefs, and

values, and listen when parents talk about their perspectives. Understanding parents' perspectives and the ways in which they are similar to, and different from, our own provides the basis for working together to support the development of each child. Ramsey (1998) offers a variety of strategies teachers can use to develop collaborations with the parents of children in their classes.

Parental roles

What does it mean to be a *good* parent? What are the attributes of a good parent? Cultural groups differ in the ways in which they understand parental roles and responsibilities. In a study of immigrant Chinese mothers and third-generation or higher European American mothers, Chao (1994) observed differences in the ways in which mothers define their roles. For example, in contrast to European American mothers, the Chinese immigrant mothers believed that young children should be cared for only by their mothers or by some other family member.

Also in contrast to European American mothers, the Chinese

immigrant mothers placed a strong emphasis on training and teaching children. To them, being a good mother meant that one started training as soon as the child was ready to learn. The Chinese immigrant mothers endorsed the belief that the primary way in which mothers express their love to their child is by helping the child succeed, especially in school. From this perspective early childhood programs that emphasize play and a constructivist approach might be viewed with suspicion if the parent does not see a clear academic focus in the curriculum.

Among Native American nations, the role of the parent is often defined in ways that are distinct from Western models of parenting. For example, in some Native American communities, responsibility for the care and nurturing of the child extends beyond the parents; grandparents, aunts, or uncles may have primary responsibility for the discipline of the child (Machamer & Gruber 1998). Tribal elders may need to be consulted on matters regarding the care of the child (Joe & Malach 1992). The parent does not have sole authority for making decisions about the child. An implication of shared parenting responsibilities is that the parents may want to include other people in meetings in which decisions about the child will be made or they may want to delay giving a response to the teacher until they can consult with others.

In addition, cultural orientations affect how individuals view themselves in their parenting role. In a cross-national study of mothers of 20-month-old infants from Argentina, Belgium, France, Israel, Italy, Japan, and the United States, researchers (Bornstein et al. 1998) found, for example, that Japanese mothers were more likely than other mothers to attribute parenting successes to their children's behavior and parenting failures to their own

lack of effort. Although the Japanese mothers rated themselves high in their investment in parenting, they rated themselves low in terms of their satisfaction with their parenting and their competence as parents.

This pattern of beliefs fits with the emphasis Japanese culture places on being modest and on the importance of working hard. When parenting is going well, the Japanese mother attributes the success to her child and not to her own ability. When something is wrong, it is because she has not put enough effort into her parenting.

U.S. mothers, however, rate themselves as relatively competent and satisfied with their parenting skills. When U.S. mothers feel something is wrong in their parenting, they are much less likely than Japanese mothers to attribute the problem to something that they have (or have not) done.

Implications for teachers and caregivers

Why should these differences matter to early childhood teachers? As Ramsey (1998) notes, we often expect parents and schools to share common philosophies and practices about young children. Yet our teaching practices reflect our own, and our culture's, goals for children's development and education.

Understanding the ways in which parents (mothers and fathers) view their parenting roles and responsibility for their child's behavior provides us with another way to understand parents' behaviors and interactions with us. For example, teachers want children to learn to get along with each other and to solve disputes without fighting. Western understanding of typical development suggests that we can expect 2- and 3-year-olds to resort to hitting and pushing, rather than more reasoned conversation, to get what they want.

We intervene in these disputes, but as Western teachers and parents, we see the source of the behavior as growing from children's individual characteristics, and we act accordingly (by teaching children more appropriate behaviors). Our response to behaviors such as fighting will be different from that of parents whose cultural beliefs suggest that parents bear more responsibility for children's behaviors. For these parents, a logical response would be to call the parents of the children involved in a dispute to inform them of their children's (mis)behavior and to suggest that the parents need to do a better job teaching their children.

Even though we may disagree with parents' suggested responses in situations such as this, understanding the different ways in which adults think about parenting and children's behaviors enhances our collaborations with parents.

Language

Language is one of the most noticeable sources of diversity in early childhood classrooms. Although the type of language spoken in the home is not a parenting practice per se, home language usage can have a profound effect on children's adjustment to early childhood programs.

In 1991, 38 percent of the 3- to 5-year-old preschoolers in our country who lived in homes in which a language other than English was the primary language participated in center-based early childhood programs (Hofferth et al. 1994). Kagan and Garcia (1991) estimated that by the year 2000, about five million preschoolers in the United States would be from families speaking a language other than English.

Not only do children enter early childhood programs speaking (or having primarily heard) a language other than English, but they also

have been exposed to varying amounts of language and socialized to use language in different ways. For example, in a longitudinal study focusing on the ways in which parents in 42 midwestern families interacted with their young children, Hart and Risley (1995) observed a vast range in the amount the parent talked to the child, from a low of about 50 utterances per hour to a high of approximately 800 utterances per hour when the children were 11–18 months of age.

Because the amount the parent talked to the infant was highly correlated with the amount the parent talked to the child at age 3, the consistency in parenting behavior results in an important cumulative difference in children's environments. If a child hears 50 utterances an hour for an average of 14 waking hours per day, that child will be exposed to about 700 utterances each day. On the other hand, if a parent addresses the child 800 times per hour, the child will hear more than 11,000 utterances each day.

Thus, children entering early childhood programs at age 3 or 4 already may have experienced great differences in their exposure to language. Hart and Risley (1995) found that greater diversity in parents' language was associated with more rapid growth in children's vocabulary. Consequently some children in our early childhood education and care programs may have a greater need for language exposure than do other children. Some young children may function at a lower level not because of any inherent cognitive limitations but because they have heard less language.

Cross-cultural studies identify numerous ways in which language socialization varies across cultures. For example, Fernald and Morikawa (1993) observed mother-infant interaction in White, middle-class American families and Japanese families

How can teachers respond to such diversity in language among the children and families in their classrooms?

temporarily residing in the United States. Although the mothers adapted their language to the abilities of their infants in similar ways (for example, simplifying their speech and adding interesting sounds to attract their infant's attention), several differences emerged in the ways in which the mothers spoke to their infants.

American mothers labeled target objects more often and were more likely to use the adult form of the target label (for instance, *dog* instead of names such as *doggie*, *woof-woof*, or *Mr. Doggy*). Japanese mothers were less likely to identify the object with a name. Whereas American mothers were more likely to talk about the object, Japanese mothers used the object to involve their infants in social interactions. "*Hai buubuu.* (Here! It's a vroom vroom [car].) *Hai doozo.* (I give it to you.) *Hai kore choodai.* (Now give this to me.) *Choodai.* (Give me.) *Hai arigatoo.* (Yes! Thank you.)" (Fernald & Morikawa 1993, 653).

The Japanese mothers also encouraged their infants to be warm and empathetic toward the toy. For example, as a mother helped her infant gently pat the dog, she would say, "*Hai wan-chan.* (Here! It's a doggy.) *Kawaii kawaii shi-te age-te.* (Give it a love.) *Kawaii kawaii kawaii.* (Love, love, love.)" (653). While the American mothers emphasized teaching their children about the objects in the world around them, the Japanese mothers focused on socializing their children's interpersonal skills.

Implications for teachers and caregivers

One implication of learning to use language in different ways is that some children may be less fa-

miliar with standard classroom uses of language.

For example, Heath (1983) observed young children in a community in the Piedmont Carolinas in which children did not often take the role of information givers. In particular, young children were not asked questions to which the adult already knew the answer (for example, "What color is this?"). When teachers asked children these types of questions, the children were confused. They did not understand that the purpose of this type of question asking was for them to demonstrate what they knew—not for the teacher to learn something. Similarly, children in this community did not understand that teachers were giving them directions when they made indirect statements ("Someone else is talking now; we'll all have to wait.") or asked certain questions ("Is this where the scissors belong?") (Heath 1983, 280).

Language reveals cultural differences. It is not simply that the child and the teacher may speak different languages. They may both speak English but may be accustomed to using the language in different ways.

How can teachers respond to such diversity in language among the children and families in their classrooms? We need to develop strategies to communicate when parents are not fluent English speakers and when we are not fluent speakers of their home language. This may mean that we need to locate a translator for meetings with the entire class as well as with individual families. Translators may be people we know in the community or they may be friends (or family members) of parents whose children are in our



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schools. Although speaking through a translator makes conversation more stilted, it provides a beginning way to bridge the gap between home and school.

Developing sensitivity to parents' beliefs and practices

Given the great diversity in our country, it is virtually impossible to know what parents from each cultural group believe about child development and parenting practices. Even if it were possible to learn what each cultural group believes, great variation always exists within each group in terms of what individuals value and practice.

What can early childhood teachers do to enhance their ability to work with all families of children in their

classrooms? Most important, we should not make assumptions about a family's practices. Within any cultural group—be it ethnic, racial, socioeconomic, or religious—individuals and families vary in their beliefs and adherence to the social conventions of their community.

Listening to parents and sharing our own perspectives is one way that we can begin to understand individual families' goals for their children and the ways in which they try to help their children achieve these goals. Asking parents how we can complement their efforts, rather than telling them what they ought to be doing, supports this type of communication.

This also requires that we understand that some families' beliefs will be quite different from our own and that we learn to appreciate these differences. For example, in one family

we know, the parents' (culturally based) values often reflect goals of interdependence, rather than independence, for their young children. One way that is expressed is in mealtime activities; in this family, the mother feeds her 12-month-old rather than giving him the opportunity to feed himself. Imagine this child's surprise when he entered an infant/toddler classroom in which children had the opportunity to finger-feed themselves Cheerios and drink from sippy-cups! The child sat quietly watching other children eat, then he whimpered for a teacher to feed him.

How might the teacher respond? Is it important that this little boy learn to become more independent (a goal of many parents and teachers)? To what extent should the teacher (and the school) change her ways of feeding this child to reflect the family's values at school?

When the teacher and a child speak different languages—whether in a classroom in which several children speak the same other-than-English language, several children speak different languages, or only one child does not speak English—the teacher can do several things to help the child adjust to the classroom. The first of these, of course, is learning how to pronounce children's names. Tabors (1997) suggests that teachers also learn a few useful words in the child's language (for example, *bathroom, eat, stop, listen*). Using sheltered English strategies—gesturing, using objects and pictures to help convey ideas—gives children additional cues to help decode the message.

Activity choices (for instance, manipulatives) which the child can enter without having to negotiate interactions with other children offer the child who is learning English a safe haven (Tabors 1997) or respite from having to constantly work hard to try to understand other people

and to make other people understand her. From the child's perspective, observing and following what other children are doing is one of the most useful strategies for coping in the classroom. If teachers include the child in a small group so that there are models to follow, the child who is learning English will have a better chance of understanding the teacher's instructions (Okagaki & Sternberg 1994). Similarly, if the teacher establishes consistent routines for the class, the child who is learning English can more easily participate in classroom activities.

Asking parents to share their child's favorite songs (in the child's home language) provides a way for teachers to share the linguistic diversity of the classroom with all children. This also provides the child an opportunity to be an "expert," teaching classmates something that is familiar to him.

Even in a classroom in which all children share a similar cultural, ethnic, and linguistic background, family experiences are different for each child. Providing children and families opportunities to share their own family cultures with other children is a way to bring a child's experiences from home into school.

There are a variety of ways in which this might be accomplished: by having small and large group activities where children (and teachers) have the opportunity to share something special about their family and their life at home; by using photographs of children's and the teacher's families for a bulletin board or classroom book; by asking parents to provide copies of their children's favorite music or stories for use during free-choice and group activities; by inviting parents into the classroom to share a family activity with the other children. Teachers can use many more strategies to understand and reflect the beliefs and values of families and children (see

Derman-Sparks & the A.B.C. Task Force 1989; Lynch & Hanson 1992; Tabors 1997; Ramsey 1998).

Reviewing our teaching practices and thinking about ways to change our classrooms to be more accommodating and empowering to a wider range of children and families is an important task. As we become more successful, we reflect and appreciate the diversity in our communities.

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